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Lake Michigan bluff areas at Fort Sheridan have taken another step toward protection from development with a U.S. Navy agreement to transfer its ownership of the property to an environmental trust of natural resource protection organizations.

The agreement was hammered-out by U.S. Rep. Mark S. Kirk, R-10, of Highland Park and will protect about eight threatened and endangered plant and migratory bird species as well as provide open space for the public.

The action still requires U.S. Senate approval and, once received, could place the property in public use by next year.

"By acting forcefully now, we will preserve a key habitat located on Lake Michigan's shoreline for the permanent enjoyment of the public," Kirk said in a written statement.

"We're excited," said Executive Director Stephen Bartram of the Lake Forest Open Lands Association. "I think the entire conservation community is excited. I think Highland Park should be excited."

Joyce O'Keefe, associate director of the Openlands Project, of Chicago, welcomed the agreement and said the protected area is significant to all of Illinois.

However, additional work will be needed to protect the complex.

"It's certainly nice to have that portion of the beach and bluff open, but it's going to take some money to restore it," said Highland Park Mayor Michael D. Belsky.

He said the agreement will affect what can happen on the table land on the top of the bluff area and will require that the Navy be sensitive to the environmental effects of development

decisions in that area.

Bartram and O'Keefe each expect multiple units of government and not-for-profit groups to be partners in the final effort to protect the area. These may include the Nature Conservancy, Lake County Forest Preserve District, the Park District of Highland Park and Highland Park itself.

"Actually the State of Illinois could play a role," said O'Keefe.

During a Monday morning tour of the bluff area, Kirk identified the proposed boundaries of the new Lake Michigan Park and discussed the endangered species to be protected there.

"Only 60 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline exists within Illinois," Kirk said in a prepared statement. "Most of that land is privately controlled. This new park to protect the bluffs will be one of the only original Lake Michigan Shoreline habitats open to the public."

In Lake County, Illinois Beach State Park near Winthrop Harbor, Zion and Beach Park provides another large area for the public to gain access to a beach-dunes ecological complex. The area donated by the Navy, however, is unique because of the bluffs.

"This is really the important first step," Bartram said.

He is hopeful the U.S. Senate will follow through based on their recognition of the regionally significant importance of the Lake Michigan shoreline.

Kirk won approval from the U.S. House of Representatives for legislation to permit the Navy to transfer its ownership. The legislation was part of a Department of Defense authorization bill now pending in the U.S. Senate. The transfer process could be complete by next year.

The bluffs are located at the southern end of Fort Sheridan.

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